

BOOK REVIEWS

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THANT MYINT-U. *The Making of Modern Burma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2001. 284 pp. Introduction, bibliography, index. £16.95. Paperback.

Towards the conclusion of his fine and valuable book, Thant Myint-U explains that he has tried to paint, “in broad and tentative strokes”, how the old world of the Konbaung dynasty was transformed into British Burma of the late nineteenth century. Certainly, in places the strokes are broad, for this text covers a hundred years of turbulent times, encompassing the reigns of six Alaungpaya monarchs and fifteen years of colonial rule.

For many years, Burma has been singularly lacking in general histories. This book is not a complete history of the country, focusing solely on the nineteenth century—a period that the author believes is most relevant to our understanding of modern Burma. In places, there is extraordinary attention to detail, particularly in the early chapters, enabling the reader to see Burma as it was in the century’s first quarter. The majority of the population then lived in the capital or were spread along the Irrawaddy valley in small villages. Kinship played an important part in the villagers’ lives and intermarriage between cross cousins was particularly prevalent in many of the small communities. The explanation of the derivation of many of the Burmese words used throughout the book is another pleasing feature. Refreshing, too, are the scattered pen pictures of notable characters appearing in the text. These brief biographies give life to the material.

However, besides broad strokes, there are also times when a finer brush stroke is used. In Chapter 3, “The Court of Ava”, the author is a pointillist, carefully laying on, instead of colours, information so that the Court and its inhabitants—the kings, their royal households, the royal agencies and the Burmese nobility who dwelt within the Royal City—merge into a vivid picture of a court that seems supremely capable of managing its kingdom. While the business of the Royal City continued to remain in the hands of the king and his ministers, other methods were used to maintain control of the Irrawaddy valley and the more distant territories. Authority in the valley was carefully delegated to provincial governors, *myowun*, limited to shortish tenure in these positions to reduce their influence, while tributary princes known as *sawbwa* maintained control of the less settled areas. It is rare to see the kingdom of Ava depicted so thoroughly, appearing powerful and assured in its possessions and its military prowess. The Court’s supreme confidence in challenging the British in 1824 is well explained and understandable.

As the book progresses, the author carefully builds up his picture of nineteenth century Ava. The endeavours of King Mindon to modernise his depleted kingdom are examined. His reforms and his failures are carefully noted, and the loss of the valuable south, once Ava's breadbasket, begins to appear an insurmountable obstacle to Ava's future success.

The chapter that discusses the pacification of Burma by the British (for there were troubles in Lower Burma as well as Upper Burma) is handled in an exemplary fashion by the author, without unnecessary hyperbole. As the author explains, even before the British arrival, the Court's control of the kingdom had been fraying, especially in the districts close to Mandalay. The capture of the Royal City simply triggered further disorder. While the British endeavoured to bring some semblance of order to their new territory, resistance against their authority increased. The three related elements to this resistance are discussed rationally. These were increased banditry, surging patriotic sentiment among some princes and members of the old aristocracy and finally, a return of millenarianism. There was, as the author explains, passive as well as active resistance, with some members of the Hluttaw contributing in this fashion.

Confronted by such a demanding task as portraying the emergence of modern Burma, there are times, understandably, when the author falters. Burma specialists will note errors, generalisations and the occasional spelling and numerical mistake. Yenangyaung, for example, is on the east bank, not the west bank of the Irrawaddy. References in the index referring to "Mekkaya, Prince of (Maung Myo)" also include pages on which Mindon's son, the Mekkaya Prince appears. How can Mindon's chief queen, a daughter of Bagyidaw, be a full sister of Pagan, when earlier we have been told that he is Mindon's elder half-brother? Most of these, I hope, will be corrected in the next edition. Small as some of these errors may appear, they do detract from the book, which is a shame. For an important work of this nature, it also seems surprising that the publisher has not insisted on a more extensive index plus a glossary of the invaluable Burmese terminology used throughout the book.

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ROBERT H. TAYLOR (ed.). *Burma: Political Economy under Military Rule*. New York: Palgrave. 2001. vii, 168pp. Introduction, tables, index. Paperback.

While the rule of the military council of Burma (State Peace and Development Council [SPDC], formerly State Law and Order Council [SLORC]) is in its fifteenth year, the question of how best to develop the country still divides scholars, politicians, and activists. The eight essays edited by Robert Taylor reflect the divisions as well the assumptions shared, which Taylor encapsulates in his introduction as "a shared pessimism" (p. 3). The expectations of rapid change, raised in the turbulent summer of 1988, have evaporated, and the authors, gathering in 1998 after a ten-year interval, approached their topic in a somber mood. Still, the differences in approach, analysis, and policy suggestions are stark.

On the one hand, two authors put the blame for Burma's political, economic, and social woes squarely on the military government. Both Jürgen Ruland ("Burma Ten Years after the Uprising: The Regional Dimension") and Josef Silverstein ("Burma and the World:

A Decade of Foreign Policy under the State Law and Order Restoration Council”) focus on Burma’s foreign affairs, contrasting Europe’s and America’s stiff opposition with the milder stand of ASEAN states and China’s support. Both agree that “constructive engagement” has not yielded significant results, but they part ways where future policies are concerned. Whereas Silverstein defines the military government as such as the root of Burma’s troubles, Ruland suggests a softening stance of the west should the Burmese government initiate piecemeal reform.

He thus joins hands with Robert Taylor, David Steinberg, and Martin Smith, all of whom advocate a more constructive dialogue between the Burmese government, the opposition, and foreign states. Taylor (“Stifling Change: The Army Remains in Command”) combines his analysis of Burma as a country lacking key ingredients for quick social and political improvement with an acerbic critique of western policies, which he says are depriving themselves of any influence by isolating Burma. Similarly, Smith (“Burmese Politics after 1988: An Era of New and Uncertain Change”) notes a “basic inability of the two sides to communicate” (p. 29) in the opposition’s inelastic confrontational stance directed against a government that lists repression as its main tool of persuasion. The power struggle in Rangoon, he concludes, may not have alleviated poverty in the countryside, whereas the government’s cease fires with ethnic minorities at least removed one major threat to life and property. David Steinberg (“The Burmese Conundrum: Approaching Reformation of the Political Economy”) similarly advocates incremental change instead of a forced switch to a nominal multi-party system which, he holds, is unlikely to emerge in the face of the military’s resistance and is even more unlikely to lead to a genuine and functioning democracy soon. Instead, structural reforms of the economy are to remove obstacles to socioeconomic development, NGOs might help on humanitarian issues and on creating a civil society, and foreign brokers might guide the domestic parties to compromise. In perhaps the theoretically most ambitious contribution, Stefan Collignon (“Human Rights and the Economy in Burma”) seeks to link democracy, social structure, legal and economic institutions, and long-term growth. Human rights and democracy, he argues, are based on a strong middle class emerging from a successful market economy, which in turn can only flourish on the basis of trust in legal and monetary institutions. Since such trust is lacking in Burma, several phases of unsustainable economic growth in the last thirty years always alternated with years of stagnation. Sound macroeconomics, including a robust monetary system, are crucial for sustained growth and consequent development; therefore, aid should be conditional on both political and economic reforms.

In a more practical mood, David Tegenfeld (“International Non-Government Organizations in Burma”) emphasizes the positive impact on health and the growth of social capital that non-government organizations have, and calls for their support. This is echoed by Seng Raw (“Views from Myanmar: An Ethnic Minority Perspective”), a Kachin community worker, who gauges that foreign funds for projects in the ethnic minorities’ areas would critically diminish the gap with the core of Burma.

Hence, the book offers a rich harvest of well-argued and passionate views on Burma, and the criticisms are minor. To begin with, the title does not reflect the breadth of topics covered. It is sometimes confusing to read a book printed in 2001 that is based on the state of politics in early 1999. Finally, some of the papers overlap thematically; it would have been better to keep their foci separate.

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